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The Canon of Early Filipino Poetry in English: A Feminist Challenge

EDNA ZAPANTA-MANLAPAZ

"The absence of women's writings from literary histories signals acts of erasure which betoken patriarchal conspiracy."¹ Is this a legitimate indictment of patriarchy, in the case of Filipino poetry in English during the first half of the century?² Or is this merely an instance of feminist paranoia? The prosecution needs to rest its case on the establishment of two points: The first is that there is in fact an "absence" of women's poetry from the literary history of Filipino poetry in English during this period, from 1905 to around the mid 1950s. The second is that that absence is the consequence of a deliberate "act of erasure" on the part of patriarchy.

WOMEN'S POETRY: PRESENT OR ABSENT?

The first point can be established by comparing two sets of statistics. The first set refers to the number of poems actually published by female and male poets during this period. The second set refers to the number of poems by these same female and male poets as they are re-presented in the written records of that history.

1. K. K. Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 122. The claim is not Ruthven's own; he is merely phrasing a commonplace feminist argument.

2. In this article, unless otherwise indicated, all references are restricted to poetry written in English by Filipinos between the years 1905 (when the first Filipino verses in English were published) and the mid 1950s (when Filipino poetry in English entered into a formalist phase under the influence of the American New Critics). The reader is asked to keep these temporal restrictions in mind, since the present essay may at times—in the course of an unavoidably polemical discussion of the relation between women's writing and patriarchy—seem to make generalizations no longer warranted by a comprehensive survey of the subject.

The *Index to Philippine Poetry in English, 1905-1950* lists nearly 10,000 poems, 8,863 of them by 1,723 males, 977 of them by 320 females.³

Other ways of looking at these same figures are: that there was one female poet for every 5.38 male poets; that the male poet wrote an average of 5.14 poems, the female an average of 3.05; and that the female poet produced one poem for every 1.68 poems by the male poet.

Viewed any which way, these statistics show that there were Filipino women poets sufficient in number and prolific enough to have contributed a sizeable, even substantial, share in the production of poetry in English. In other words, these statistics serve witness that women's poetry was indeed "present" in the literary production of their time.⁴

If not in this sense, i.e., existence, in what other sense can women's poetry still be said to have been "absent"?

The answer to this question can be found in the statistics drawn from certain major documents that, together with some minor ones, function collectively as the "literary history" of that period. In this case these are three major anthologies, a textbook series issued by the Bureau of Education, and a work that purported to be the first history of Philippine literature. These three types of documents, by nature of what they are, implicitly claim an authority by which they select for inclusion those poems that are deemed important enough to merit reproduction and thereby, wider circulation not only among contemporary readers but also later generations.

The first anthology of "Filipino-English" verse was *Filipino Poetry*, edited by Rodolfo Dato and published in 1924.⁵ It gathered together

3. Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz and Gemino H. Abad, eds., *Index to Filipino Poetry in English, 1905-1950* (Manila: National Book Store, 1988). This index, while not claiming to be exhaustive, is the most comprehensive bibliography available on the subject. Though it consists of approximately 16,000 entries, it actually lists only some 10,000 poems since it records all the reprints of every listed poem. The figures cited for male- and female-authored poems do not include some 500 poems which were either published anonymously or appeared under a pseudonym. These make up a special category which are listed separately. However, the probability is that most of these poems were in fact written by women, they having the more reasons to hide their authorship from the public; in this case, the actual number of women-authored poems would be higher than those listed in the text.

4. It is also important to point out a little known fact: that women poets were present from the beginning of that literary history. The first Filipino verses in English were published in *The Filipino Students Magazine*, the "official organ of the Filipino students in America." A quarterly published in Berkeley by Filipino pensionados (American-Philippine government scholars), it first appeared in April, 1905. Its June issue featured a poem "Our Reasons in [sic] Study" by Maria G. Romero.

5. Rodolfo Dato, ed., *Filipino Poetry*, Introduction by R. Dato (Manila: J.S. Agustin and Sons, 1924).

a wide variety of poems found in old newspapers on file in the Philippine library and Museum that presented themselves to Dato as "the maiden songs of our native bards warbling in borrowed language. . . ." Of the thirty-two poems he chose for the collection, only six were by women:⁶ "A Lover's Hope" by Consolacion Almoradie, "A Prayer" by Elena C. de la Cruz; "The Two Paths" by Maria Agoncillo; three poems by Ana Chavez (Natividad Marquez): "The Sampaguita," "The Stranger at the Gate," "The Angelus," and an English translation of the Philippine national anthem by Paz Marquez.

The second major collection, appearing a decade after Dato's, was a bilingual collection, *English-German Anthology of Filipino Poetry*,⁷ edited and translated by Pablo Laslo. Striving for a collection "most representative of our efforts in lyric poetry," Laslo chose 57 poems by 33 poets, of which only six poems are by three women: Natividad Marquez's "The Sea" and "The Angelus"; Angela Manalang-Gloria's "Canticle"; Trinidad Tarrosa Subido's "Love Me Not Long," "Vanity," and "Vox Femina."

Published in 1947 after the war was Manuel Viray's *Heart of the Island: An Anthology of Philippine Poetry in English*.⁸ Noting that "after more than four and a half decades of learning and using the English language, the Filipinos can now present a respectable collection in the hardest department of literary art—poetry," Viray selected 112 poems by twenty-five male poets and eleven poems by three female poets: seven by Trinidad Tarrosa Subido, one by Toribia Maño and three by the young Edith Tiempo.

The next category of documents to be examined here are textbooks, specifically the textbook series issued by the Bureau of Education under the title *Philippine Prose and Poetry*. It "represents the first serious attempt to make use of exclusively local contributions in literature as subject matter for classroom instruction in secondary schools."⁹ The series is made up of four volumes: the first volume, intended for first year students, was issued in 1927; the second volume, in 1933; the third

6. This number does not include the poem "Crisalides," written by a certain "Nacing," who was almost certainly a woman.

7. Pablo Laslo, ed. and trans., *English-German Anthology of Filipino Poetry*, Foreword by Salvador Lopez and Introduction by Pablo Laslo (Manila: Libreria Manila Filatelica, 1934).

8. Manuel A. Viray, ed., *Heart of the Island: An Anthology of Philippine Poetry in English*. Intro. by Viray. A Barangay Writers' Project Book (Manila: University Publishing Company, 1947).

9. Bureau of Education, *Philippine Prose and Poetry*, 4 vols: I, 1927 (rev. 1929, 1935, and 1960); II, 1933 (rev. 1964); III, 1938 (rev. 1961) and IV, 1951 (rev. 1963). III; Luther B. Bewley, "Foreword" to Volume I, 1935.

in 1938 and the final volume in 1951. The volumes were reprinted several times and used by the public school system throughout the entire archipelago. For over three decades (1927 to 1964) it was the most widely circulated and therefore influential textbook, shaping both the moral vision and aesthetic sensibility of young Filipinos. The four volumes feature a total of thirty-two poems: twenty-four by men and eight by 3 women. On the safe assumption that at least half of the schoolchildren were females, it is strange that only one fourth of the poems are by women.

Teofilo del Castillo's *A Brief History of Philippine Literature*,¹⁰ published in 1937, was a pioneering work of its kind. Its last chapter, on poetry in English, contains sixty-three poems by forty-three poets, only six of them by three women: Natividad Marquez's "The Sampaguita" and "The Sea"; Angela Manalang Gloria's "Yellow Moon" and "By the Cool Reeds"; Trinidad Tarrosa Subido's "To Manhattan" and "Sonnets to a Gardener."

These sources demonstrate that the degree to which these documents represent women's poetry ranges from 9 percent to 25 percent, with the median set at 10 percent. Since this figure more or less corresponds to the ratio of women's poetry to the total poetry of the period, the claim can still thus be made that, at least in the quantitative sense, these documents represent, i.e., stand in place of a larger body, of women's poetry fairly.

A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Since it is clear that women's poetry was "present" i.e., actually existed in literary publications in the period and that women's poetry was re-presented fairly in its written records, is there a case at all for the alleged "absence" of women's poetry in Filipino literary history? The answer is "yes," if one shifts the ground from mathematical proportion to other indices of significance. A re-view of the same documents, this time from a feminist perspective, presents a different picture that provokes certain questions.

First, by what criteria did the editors judge that none but a few poems by women were worthy of re-presentation, i.e., presenting again, in their respective collections? Literary merit? Not one of the editors singled out this criterion as their principal, much less, sole criterion for inclusion. Dato apparently had no illusions about the quality of the poems, freely conceding that they "were by no means a treasury

10. Teofilo del Castillo y Tuazon, *A Brief History of Philippine Literature*, foreword by Teodoro M. Kalaw (Manila: Progressive Schoolbooks, 1937).

of imperishable literary gems." In trying for a collection that would be "most representative of our efforts in lyric poetry," Laslo admitted that the poems covered a wide field, "from the most simple and appealing, which reminds you of Longfellow, to courageous attempts at reflective poetry which remind you of Wordsworth at his worst."

Far from basing their selections on purely literary merit, some of the editors admitted to a consideration of non-literary criteria. As his bilingual anthology required, Laslo needed to use as one criterion that of translatability, i.e., how well a particular poem could be recast into another language "without loss of the essential coloring and original inspiration." The Philippine Prose and Poetry series, intended for the education of young Filipino students, needed to consider the pedagogical value of the poems for inclusion.

The point here is this: the use of other criteria would have invited, even demanded, the inclusion of far more poems by Filipino women. Surely, one might argue, a highly desirable criterion for selection might also have been Filipino women's perspective of the world?

Take for example, *Guerilla Flower*, a collection of some one hundred poems about the war experiences of the people of Panay.¹¹ Editor Juan L. Raso introduces the poems as "the writings that were given birth by the feeble light of dying camp fires, in the mountain fastness, in the firing line, in the prolonged siege against enemy garrisons, in lonely watches on the hilltops, in the wake of tragedies, in frenzied escape, and finally, in the later jubilant development which ended in the liberation of our country." The impression given by both this introduction and the selections themselves is that war was an exclusively male experience. Though combat may have been experienced only by the men, the war certainly involved women as well. No doubt the experiences of the two sexes were different, but this is precisely why the inclusion of women's poetry in the collection would have made it a more valuable record of war experiences. In fact, Raso did include two poems by a woman named Candida Tirador. One of them paid tribute to the fallen dead and the other told of "the lady with a lamp," an allusion to the Virgin Mary. But these poems, being two of a hundred, can hardly be said to represent women in this collection.

Dominated as they are by male poetry, these collections present only a partial, thus skewed view of the world. The inclusion of more poems by women would have effected a more balanced world view and thus, one likely to be consonant with reality. For, after all, do not women hold up half the sky over the Philippine archipelago?

11. Juan L. Raso, ed., *Guerilla Flower* (Iloilo: Diolosa Publishing House, 1946).

Second, why are so few poems by so few women presented in the anthologies, giving the misleading impression of a negligible body of poetry? When the women whose poems are included in these collections are identified, they total only nine. And of these nine, the names of only three—those of Natividad Marquez, Angela Manalang Gloria and Trinidad Tarrosa Subido—appear in three or more of the documents. Furthermore, in the case of Marquez (a.k.a. Ana Chavez), she is represented by the same three poems. Surely two dozen poems by only nine women cannot be considered a fair representation of the poetic inheritance bequeathed us by our mothers?

To return now to the original question: Is poetry by Filipino women "absent" from Filipino literary history? The answer is "Yes," in that there were too few women's voices on record to express the wide range, low notes as well as high, of Filipino women's experiences during this momentous period of our nation's history. In this context, then, the term "absence" refers not so much to "non-presence" as to "lack," both in actual fact and in textual representation.

CHALLENGING MAN-MADE CANONS: A WORLDWIDE FEMINIST AGENDA

The "absence," in this sense, of women's writings from the literary histories of most national literatures has been noted with alarm and anger by feminist literary critics. They have been emboldened by poststructuralism, which challenges all the usual assumptions of literary studies, including and especially canon formation. They have come to recognize that canons are actually mere constructs, whose supposedly objective/neutral criteria can be shown to actually serve the ideology of patriarchy; more to the point, that canons are, literally, man-made.

There are usually two strategies by which feminist critics attempt to change the canon. The first is to work to gain admission into the existing canon of more works by women. "The least threatening way [of doing this is by] making the case for individual writers one by one."¹² Here, "the underlying argument . . . is that consistency, fidelity to these virtues [literary quality, timelessness, universality and other such qualities as constitute the rationale for canonicity] requires recognition [by males] of at least the few best and best known women

12. Lillian S. Robinson, "Treason our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon," in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 109.

writers."¹³ Other feminists, less willing to wait for males to revise or at least enlarge the canon, adopt an alternative strategy: they construct a female counter-canon alongside the existing male-dominant canon.

But black feminist critic Lillian Robinson thinks that both strategies are ultimately unsatisfactory because they fail to challenge the canon as canon. She questions the present definition of canon: "Is the canon and hence the syllabus based on it to be regarded as the compendium of excellence or as the record of cultural history?"¹⁴ For her the rationale for a canon should be based on the criterion of "truth to the culture being presented, the whole culture and not the creation of an almost entirely male white elite."¹⁵

Virginia Woolf had presented basically the same argument decades earlier in 1938 when she wrote *Three Guineas*. She argued even then that only one world view—that of males who exercise power—falsifies that world view. On the assumption that the two sexes view the world differently, she argued that women's writings provide an alternative view that, together with men's, make for a balanced perspective.

A common interest unites us; it is one world, one life. How essential it is that we should realize that unity. . . . For such will be our ruin if you [males] in the immensity of your public abstractions forget the private figure, or if we in the immensity of our private emotions forget the public world. Both houses will be ruined, the public and the private, the material and the spiritual, for they are inseparably connected.¹⁶

Woolf's argument is wryly affirmed by Carolyn Kizer in a poem identifying women writers as "the custodians of the world's best kept secret:/ merely the private lives of one half of humanity."¹⁷

PATRIARCHAL CONSPIRACY: FACT OR FABRICATION?

The second point to be established is whether the absence of women's poetry from literary history is to be interpreted as an "act of erasure" executed by patriarchal conspiracy. In the case of Filipino poetry in English, there seems no evidence of a conspiracy in the sense

13. Ibid., p. 112.

14. Ibid., p. 111.

15. Ibid.

16. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1938), pp. 142-43.

17. Carolyn Kizer, "Pro Femina," *Knock Upon Silence* (Garden City, New Jersey: Doubleday, 1965), pp. 41-49 quoted in Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), "Introduction," p. 6.

of a sinister plot against women poets. If not through a patriarchal conspiracy, how then explain the absence, the lack of women's poetry? There is a second theory which, for want of a better name, can be referred to as the evaluation argument. This argument holds that "many female authors are justifiably forgotten because they don't write well enough."¹⁸ Put plainly, this theory holds that women just don't make the grade. This argument provokes by way of rebuttal the following flurry of questions: Who read and mark the individual tests? Who decide the cut-off score, the passing grade? Most important of all, who design the tests in the first place?

These are all relevant questions that must be raised in the case of Filipino poetry in English where the modes of production and circulation of literary texts have largely been in the hands of males. As Cornelio Faigao, a poet-critic of that period, half confessed and half boasted, "All creative work that reaches the public has to pass through editorial winnowing."¹⁹ All the rest, presumably nothing but chaff, are gone with the wind, blown to oblivion.

What is to be noted here is that the editors of all the anthologies of the period, both major and minor, were all males: Rodolfo Dato, Pablo Laslo, Manuel Viray, Dominador Pobleto, Juan Raso, Manuel Buenafe. Not only that. The so-called "critics" of that time were also all males. For instance, Faigao, Villa and Viray all took it upon themselves to publish Rolls of Honor for the year's best poetry. Very few poems by women appear on these lists, most of them in the category of Honorable Mention.

To defend himself against the charge of complicity with his sexist colleagues, a male critic of today might be tempted to repeat this counter-argument once used by an Oxford-educated male academic: "If Kate Chopin were really worth reading, she'd have lasted—like Shakespeare."²⁰ A desperate rebuttal this, as it begs the question. From a pool of poems, mostly male editors make the initial and therefore crucial choice of which poems get to be published at all; usually, on the bases of these already published poems, mostly male anthologists decide which poems are to be re-produced; mostly male editors draw

18. The term is from Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies*, p. 122. It should be noted that Ruthven is explaining the term, not endorsing the theory itself.

19. Cornelio Faigao, "Candles in the Wind," *The Philippines Herald MidWeek Magazine*, 23 February 1938, p. 6.

20. Quoted in Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," *The New Feminist Criticism*, p. 150. Kate Chopin (1851–1904) is an American writer whose literary reputation has recently been recuperated by feminist scholars. Her novel *The Awakening* (1899) is today widely regarded as an American feminist classic.

from these anthologies poems for inclusion in textbooks; mostly male academics usually base their reading lists on these available textbooks and design their syllabi around the texts there; mostly male critics write essays on these poems, in the process perpetuating the values that qualified these poems to be published in the first place.

That is the reason why, unlike the great Shakespeare, Kate Chopin has not endured. And while it is true that this vicious cycle does not operate in an identical way in the case of Filipino literature, the pattern is similar enough to arouse the suspicion that yes, Neneng, this is certainly one reason why unlike Jose Garcia Villa, Angela Manalang Gloria is not as well known.

But does it really matter which theory—conspiracy or evaluation—was operative in the case of Filipino poetry in English? After all, male bias—whether intentional or not—has had the same effect: the diminution of value placed on women's poetry in the eyes of males and even more important, females. Laments Dale Spender:

While the catalogues, the library shelves, the bookshops, the reviews, the courses of study all help to support that women are without a literary tradition, the belief in female inferiority is surely sustained. And it erodes women's confidence; it undermines the women writers; it produces doubt.²¹

This is the reason why feminist critics regard canon-revision as no less than a strategy for survival. Since they cannot expect men to share their sense of urgency, they are forced to take the initiative. "Initially, however, the demand for wider representation of females is substantiated by an extraordinary effort of intellectual reappropriation. The emergence of feminist literary study has been channeled, at the base, by scholarship devoted to the discovery, republication and reappraisal of "lost" or undervalued writers and their works."²²

RECOVERING "LOST" FILIPINO WOMEN POETS

"Lost" is a problematic term which may be used to designate three groups:²³

1. Women who never wrote but might have, if conditions had been more propitious.

21. Dale Spender, "Women and Literary History," in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 33.

22. Robinson, "Treasure our Text," p. 109.

23. These categories of "lost" women writers are drawn from Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies*, pp. 122f.

In *A Room of One's Own*,²⁴ an Ur-text of feminist criticism, Virginia Woolf argues the necessity of certain material and psychological conditions before women can write at all. In the case of Filipino women during the first half of the century, few women had either. This, despite the fact that the period was a propitious one for them: it was during these years of the American Commonwealth that Filipino women gained entry into universities, earned money in the professional marketplaces and won the right to vote.

While it is true that universities opened their doors to women (the University of the Philippines, at its founding, in 1908 and the University of Sto. Tomas in 1926), enrollment figures show that there were far fewer women than men. The reasons for this can be traced to the patriarchal values of the era. University education was reserved for the sons in the family who would of course grow up to become the wage earners for their own families. On the other hand, high school was considered high enough for the daughters, who would of course end up getting married and raising children. In the meantime, women were to remain at home, caring for aging parents and younger siblings.

The situation grew more restrictive, even oppressive, when the women married. A wife was expected to be "the angel in the house,"²⁵ ministering to the many needs of her family, principally those of her husband.

Consider, by way of contrast, the situation of a male would-be writer, in this case Joseph Conrad:

For twenty months, I wrestled with the Lord for my creation . . . mind and will and conscience engaged to the full, hour after hour, day after day . . . a lonely struggle in a great isolation from the world. I suppose I slept and ate the food put before me and talked connectedly on suitable occasions, but I was aware of the even flow of daily life, made easy and nameless for me by a silent, watchful, tireless affection.²⁶

Who do you suppose prepared the food and set it before him? Who was this silent, watchful, tireless affection who "made easy" the even flow of daily life? Who but a woman, whether mother, sister or wife?

24. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1929).

25. The figure of "the angel in the house" is taken from Coventry Patmore's book of poems by that title (1862), in praise of the ideal Victorian wife and mother. The figure has since been appropriated by feminists to represent a male-constructed model of femininity.

26. Quoted in Tillie Olsen, "Silences," *Silences* (New York: Dell, 1978), p. 12.

The answer to this rhetorical question has been volunteered time and again by Bienvenido Santos who, once asked what single piece of advice he would give aspiring writers, answered, "Marry a woman who is willing to support you, in all senses of the word." Santos was referring to his wife Beatriz who provided her husband that lifelong support. Santos recounts how, when he needed to be alone to do some writing, he would rent an apartment for months at a time. "I cannot stop when I write. . . . In those days, I wrote until I was exhausted. I see nobody. It is the life of a monk."²⁷ While Santos served the Muse within the confines of his monk's cell, it was Beatriz who ministered to all the mundane and moral needs of the family. The ministrations of this angel in the house were multiplied by the number of children she had, which in the case of the Filipino woman of that era, were likely to be many. As feminist poet Tillie Olsen observes: "More than in any other human relationship, overwhelmingly more, motherhood means being instantly interruptable, responsive, responsible. Children need one *now*. . . ."²⁸

Olsen adds: "The very fact that these [the needs of parents, husbands and children] are real needs, that one feels them as one's own (love, not duty); *that there is no one else responsible for these needs*, gives them primacy."²⁹ She sadly concludes: "Where the claims of creation cannot be primary, the results are atrophy; unfinished work; minor effort and accomplishment; silences."³⁰ Thus does Olsen sum up the case of this category of "lost" women writers, those who never got to write at all.

2. Women who wrote but never had anything published.

There is of course no way of knowing how many women of this period actually wrote poems in English, how many actually submitted them for publication, how many received rejection slips. The Index reveals that a relatively large number of women's poems were published. Campus publications, especially those of the state university, showed themselves hospitable to the literary efforts of female students. *The Literary Apprentice's* sixteen extant issues between 1928 and 1950 featured 198 poems, 32 of them by women. Even more impressive, 131 extant issues of *The Philippine Collegian* published

27. Gemino H. Abad and Edna Z. Manlapaz, eds., *Man of Earth: An Anthology of Filipino Poetry and Verse from English, 1905 to the Mid 1950's* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press 1989), p. 404.

28. Olsen, "Silences," p. 18.

29. *Ibid.*, pp 18-19.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

between 1922 and 1945, published 109 poems by 42 women; the latter constituting 35 percent of the total poetry published in its pages.³¹

One reason for their hospitality must certainly have been the fact that women were active members of the writers' clubs and not infrequently occupied editorial positions in the publications of these clubs. The prestigious U.P. Writers' Club, founded in 1927, had a charter membership of fifteen, four of them women: Paz Latorena, Loreto Paras, Felicidad Dans, and Angela Manalang. The inaugural issue of the club's magazine, *The Literary Apprentice*, featured works by three women, one of them a poem "Remembrance" by Manalang. Among the editors of *The Philippine Collegian's* literary section were Manalang in 1927 and Trinidad Tarrosa in 1939.

Though comparative figures are not available, it appears that women's poems were welcomed into the literary sections of national newspapers and popular magazines. This was specially the case with *Philippine Magazine*, which during a period of 13 years published 121 poems by 33 women.³² With at least half of their readership presumed to be female, it is not surprising that editors, whatever they may have thought of women's poetry, published them.

As shown above, the editors of anthologies were far less hospitable and admitted few women's poems into the pages of their collections.

To follow the analogy through: If campus publications and national weeklies were hospitable and anthologists were merely polite, publishers were perfect strangers. Of the thirty-three individual collections of poetry published during this period, only two were by women; or more accurately, only one and a half, since the other was a joint collection by a husband and wife team.³³

In 1940 Angela Manalang Gloria collected seventy-nine of her poems in a slim volume titled simply *Poems*,³⁴ the same work she was to enter in that year's Commonwealth Literary Awards. Though it did not win a prize and received mixed reviews, the Bureau of Education was

31. Melinda Dy, "Poetry in English by Filipino Women Poets, 1905-1950: A Descriptive Study," (M. A. thesis, Ateneo de Manila University, 1990), p. 53.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

33. *Index to Filipino Poetry in English, 1905-1950*.

34. Angela Manalang Gloria, *Poems* (Manila: n.p., 1940). Manalang Gloria recalls with both alacrity and amusement that she was instructed to substitute the "golden bores" for "whores" in the poem "Pier 7" because the latter term was thought inappropriate for young readers. So as not to offend the Bureau of Internal Revenue and set a bad example for the young, she was also asked to change the title of a poem, from "The Tax Evader" to "I Have Begrudded the Years."

Edilberto N. Alegre and Doreen G. Fernandez, eds., *The Writer and His Milieu: An Oral History of First Generation Writers in English* (Manila: De La Salle Press, 1984), p. 59.

sufficiently interested in it to invite Manalang Gloria to prepare a student edition in 1950. As the edition was intended primarily for students, the Director of Education required Manalang Gloria to delete some poems considered inappropriate for young, impressionable readers. The point to be noted here is that Manalang Gloria had had to publish the original edition entirely with her own funds and it was only after the volume received critical notice that she received funding from a publisher—and then only upon certain conditions that violated her aesthetic sensibilities.

When Abelardo and Trinidad Subido's joint collection of poems, aptly titled *Two Voices*, appeared in 1945, it did so under the imprint of the Manila Post Publishing Company.³⁵ The first volume of poems to be published after the Liberation, it was also the first publishing venture of the company. What is generally not known is that the Subidos owned the company and therefore in reality funded the publication of their own book.

We can hypothesize that all Filipino women of this period who could use English as a medium of communication were at least potential poets and therefore can be massed in the first category of women "lost" to Filipino poetry. The second category—those who wrote poetry but never published—is problematic in that one cannot of course know how many submitted how much and what. Just the same, one cannot help suspecting that there must have been many poems penned by women that never saw print. Had male editors and publishers been more cognizant of the value of women's poetry and therefore been more open to them, there would certainly have been more women's poetry published—and consequently fewer "lost" women poets in this second category.

3. Those who got into print but were forgotten sooner or later.

The *Index* provides us with the approximate figures: nearly a thousand verses and poems by some 320 women. A sizeable number but one which, as we have already seen, dwindles to a fraction when viewed in the anthologies, textbooks and literary histories of the period.

This "disappearance" of women's poetry from these specific literary discourses is crucial because it is inclusion in these texts that helps ensure that the poems will continue to be read. According to conventional wisdom, 99 percent of all writers are forgotten twenty years after their work has been published. Even assuming this estimate to

35. Abelardo and Trinidad Subido, *Two Voices* (Manila: Manila Post Publishing Company, 1945). Preface by Salvador Lopez.

be true, however, why is it that the mortality rate for women's poetry seems so much higher than those by men? Why does one suspect, as Annis V. Pratt does, that "women's writing has not been haphazardly forgotten but deliberately buried"?³⁶

One explanation for this is the fact that approximately 75 percent of the women poets listed in the *Index* contributed only two or more poems each. Given this, it is hardly surprising that most of these women, after receiving momentary notice from their contemporaries, soon faded away from memory altogether.

Conversely, one explanation for the prominence of Manalang Gloria and Tarrosa Subido is that each produced a considerable number of poems and published approximately 150 poems each. Of course this is not to equate fecundity with longevity of reputation but it is to underscore the role of persistence. Why did not the other women writers persevere? Why did the majority of them, having already broken into print once or twice, not continue? Was it perhaps because they suspected—mistakenly or not—that no one was really listening to what they had to say? Or worse, might their voices have been silenced?³⁷

The suspicion is there because one gets the uneasy impression from reading the comments of the male poets-critics of that time that they did not much understand what women's poetry was about, what it was trying to say. Failing to account for and so appreciate the difference between women's poetry and their own, these males were apparently far from being "ideal readers" of women's poetry. Like Norman Mailer, they may have been willing to confess, "I have nothing to say about any of the talented women who write today. . . . I do not seem to be able to read them."³⁸ Though this professed inability may well have been nothing more than a disguised unwillingness to read women's writing at all, Mailer at least suggests that the problem may not be with women writers but with male readers.

This possibility would have been scoffed at by Jose Garcia Villa, who presumed he could read women's poetry, and proceeded to pass pontifical judgment on some women poets in an article pompously

36. Annis V. Pratt, "The New Feminist Writers: Explaining the History of the New Space," *Beyond Intellectual Sexism*, ed. Joan I. Roberts (New York: 1976), p. 176 quoted in Ruthven, *Feminist Literary Studies*, p. 122.

37. This impression is based on a more than cursory reading of comments by male poet-critics of the period. Only a detailed, more analytical study of these will confirm that impression. Such a study, however, lies outside the scope of the present article.

38. Norman Mailer, "Evaluation—Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room," collected in *Advertisement for Myself* (New York: Berkeley, 1966), pp. 434–35 quoted in Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," in *The New Feminist Literary Criticism*, p. 60.

titled "The Status of Philippine Poetry" and written in an *ex cathedra* tone.³⁹ In what could only have been an act of perverse gallantry, Villa chose to attack the ladies' poetry before that of the gentlemen. Consistent at least, he announced that he would discuss Manalang Gloria "first, as she has the best reputation locally." He went on:

I was one of the first to proclaim her work. But let me now blast the theory that she is a first rate poet. At her best she is a third rater, a writer of merely pretty poetry, pleasant amateur verse. Her verses have the finish lacking in her contemporaries (she is indeed our most polished writer) but she has no energy, her works are significantly inconsequential. They are pretty verses, and they are very melodious . . . it is this melodiousness that wins her readers . . . but back of it all there is nothing, no passion, no drive, only a feeble nostalgia. She is Miss Nostalgia—but not a major poet. Her verses never disturb; one reads them and is through with them. . . . They have no effect. . . . Mrs. Gloria is a poet that one can admire only in one's immaturity . . . as I did. The moment one grows up, she belongs to his era of childhood.⁴⁰

Having demoted Manalang Gloria to third rank, Villa promoted Tarrosa one rank higher: "I believe that, *interiorly*, she has very much more than Mrs. Gloria, and is therefore [her] internal superior. She has the passion necessary to poetry."⁴¹ That compliment paid, Villa could not resist adding that Tarrosa's expression was, however, "very defective."

Coming to the defence of Tarrosa, Laslo wrote:

It is true that her passion is superior to her expression but it is not true that her expression is very defective and Villa's statement that 'In her poetry she writes very bad prose, and in her prose she writes very bad poetry' is nothing else than an unprofound abortion of his eccentric brain, which he probably cudgelled for quite a time in order to find some quite extraordinary way of belittling the merits of a really good and very original poetess. The statement of Villa will do Miss Tarrosa no harm, because any

39. Jose Garcia Villa, "The Status of Philippine Poetry," *Graphic*, 6 June 1935, pp. 9, 54.

40. *Ibid.* To be fair, it must be added that Villa did not restrict his vicious attack to women poets. In the same article, he went on to attack many male poets.

Though evidence of Villa's misogyny is not wanting (his poem "Any Woman May Know," being a most explicit example), he had high praise for a very few women poets, notably Emily Dickinson ("She is the greatest woman poet, not only the greatest woman poet, but one of the greatest poets in the world.") and Loreto Paras-Sulit ("I admired her very highly. . . . Loreto wrote beautiful prose . . . she was my idol."). *The Writer and His Milieu*, pp. 296-98.

41. *Ibid.*

reasonable person who has the choice between the criticism of Villa and her poetry will choose the latter."⁴²

Laslo was right of course. No reasonable person would choose Villa's criticism over Tarrosa's poetry but that choice can be had only if women poets like Tarrosa continued to write despite such vituperous criticism. No matter that Villa's misogyny and eccentricity were notorious, it was also acknowledged that he was a poetic genius and his remarks, unfair and malicious as they invariably were, could do irreparable damage to the reputation, not to say self confidence, of any would-be poet.

Both Manalang Gloria and Tarrosa Subido, having strong faith in both their art and in themselves, continued to write poetry, going on to prove Villa mistaken in his estimation of them. But other women poets were of little faith, a particularly painful example being Frances Bennett. Villa had written of her in the same infamous article:

Frances Bennett . . . is in my opinion one of complete unimportance, whose significance is utterly nil. . . . She has neither idea nor the power of expression . . . she should be prevented from again grasping a pen."⁴³

As it turned out, no one had to wrest the pen from her fingers, because soon after that, Frances herself let go of the pen. Hers is the most overt case of silencing by the patriarchy in the person of Villa, overt because publicized. But what of the possibly many other Frances Bennetts who were similarly silenced by other Villas inside classrooms, editorial offices and publishing houses?

This is not to accuse all Filipino male poets/critics of working together in a sinister plot against Filipino women poets. To accuse them of patriarchal conspiracy in this sense would indeed be an instance of feminist paranoia. But there is another interpretation of the term "conspiracy" that may well apply in this case. In its literal sense, to "conspire" means "to breathe together." If Filipino male poets/critics failed to understand or value women's poetry, their reaction may be explained as a consequence of their all "breathing the air" of that period's patriarchal society.⁴⁴ This explanation, while acquitting them

42. Pablo Laslo, "A Few Serious Words to Mr. Jose Garcia Villa," *The Philippine Collegian*, 24 June 1935, p. 6.

43. Villa, "Status of Philippine Poetry."

44. For that matter, women poets breathed the same air. A close study of poems by Filipino women during this period reveals that many of them submitted willingly to the demands of patriarchy. To this extent, these women poets may be regarded as "accomplices" in the patriarchal conspiracy. "Wrestling with Maria Clara: Filipino Poets in English, 1905-1950," Edna Zapanta-Manlapaz and Ruth Cudala, *Philippine Studies* 38 (1990): 316-32.

of the charge of conspiracy, does not however absolve them of at least some degree of responsibility.

CONCLUSION

By whatever metaphor we choose to phrase the indictment, whether it is the silencing of female poets' speech or the erasure of their texts, the indictment stands: *The absence/lack of women's poetry from the literary history of Filipino poetry in English during the first half of the century is an act of erasure that involves patriarchal responsibility, if not conspiracy.*

In this MacIntosh era, the traditional metaphor of the pen(cil) may need to be updated to that of a computer. What words by women poets have been deleted into the scrap heap must now be retrieved, re-inserted into literary history and re-displayed on the monitors of our anthologies, textbooks and syllabi. Only this retrieval will make possible the re-reading and revaluation that women's poetry of this period deserves. Unfortunately this job of retrieval cannot be done simply by pressing a finger on the computer keyboard. The task will require the work of many hands, of male and female scholars alike. For the males, perhaps as an act of reparation but for the females, a labor of love.